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*An Old Testament Theology*  
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The author uses “I AM” in place of “LORD” in quoting the Bible and also, as indicated, uses his own translation elsewhere.

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# THE BASIS OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

The foundation [of the Christian religion] is admirable; it is the most ancient book in the world and the most authentic.

The heretical books in the beginning of the Church serve to prove the canonical.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 9.601; 8.569

## I. INTRODUCTION

If we collected all the books and articles with the words *Old Testament Theology* in their titles and looked for commonalities, we would have little to show for our efforts. As Phyllis Tribble explains, “Biblical theologians . . . have never agreed on the definition, method, organization, subject matter, point of view, or purpose of their enterprise.”<sup>1</sup> R. W. L. Moberly responds, “That does not leave much left out!”<sup>2</sup> And Ben C. Ollenburger adds further confirmation when he notes that the term *biblical theology* can mean six quite different things.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in one way or another, all biblical theologians speak of a corpus of books that they denominate as the Old Testament, or First Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures, or the like and of the God to whom it bears witness, while emphasizing history as a central category in biblical faith.

From the beginning of the discipline, biblical theologians have differed in their understandings of an accredited basis, task, and method for doing biblical theology.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, biblical theologians aim to construct and formulate a theology that accords in some sense with the Bible, while essentially agreeing with James Barr’s assertion: “What we are looking for is a ‘theology’ that existed back there and then.”<sup>5</sup> Though this sounds like a pedantic, antiquarian study that “locks the

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1. Phyllis Tribble, “Overture for a Feminist Biblical Theology,” in *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology: A Reader in Twentieth-Century Old Testament Theology, 1930–1990*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger, Elmer A. Martens, and Gerhard F. Hasel (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 451.

2. R. W. L. Moberly, “Theology of the Old Testament,” in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 453.

3. Ben C. Ollenburger, “From Timeless Ideas to the Essence

of Religion: Method in Old Testament Theology before 1930,” in *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*, 3.

4. I am indebted for this analysis of introductory issues in doing Old Testament theology to the chapter “Basis, Task and Method of Old Testament Theology,” in T. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958; 2nd ed. 1970), 118–27.

5. James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 4.

Bible into the past,”<sup>6</sup> it is nothing of the sort for the faithful. For them, what the Bible meant it means. The Bible is the normative standard for faith and practice in the church, and its “truth” demands a personal commitment and actualization in every aspect of their lives. This is so because its writers were inspired by God to give this revelation of his character, intentions, teachings, and commands to govern volitional creatures.

Many biblical theologians, however, reject this orthodox understanding of the Bible’s inspiration and its canonical authority. Some profess a new dogma that the Bible is only the product of Israel’s experiences and human thoughts about God. In effect, these theologians replace biblical theology with the history of Israel’s religion. Nevertheless, their views are sometimes wrongly represented as belonging to the discipline of biblical theology.

Recently, several excellent surveys have come out, giving us the lay of the land in this discipline; hence, it would not be fruitful to duplicate those efforts in this volume.<sup>7</sup> Instead, I offer the following observation: Scholars commonly locate the beginning of the discipline in 1787 when Johann Philipp Gabler, in his famous inaugural address at the University of Altdorf, Switzerland, sharply distinguished between biblical theology as a historical discipline and dogmatic theology as a didactic discipline. Fortunately, his distinction creates the space for scholars to read the Bible as a developing historical document; unfortunately, he steers the discipline astray from the start. Cut off from the foundation of dogmatic theology, Gabler seeks by the canon of reason to determine what is “true” in the Old Testament and of abiding value for dogmatic theology.<sup>8</sup> Postmodernists realize the impossibility of grounding absolute truth on the finite human mind. Unfortunately, they do not look to the spiritual virtue of faith in the God of the Bible to resolve the human epistemological predicament.

Historically the church confesses that God reveals his nature and mind and inspires human agents to present them in infallible Scriptures and that his Spirit illuminates the meaning of the Scriptures to the faithful. Brevard S. Childs adopts and defends a self-consciously confessional approach: “The role of the Bible is not being understood simply as a cultural expression of ancient peoples, but as a testimony pointing beyond itself to divine reality to which it bears witness. . . . Such an approach to the Bible is obviously confessional. Yet the Enlightenment’s alternative

6. James Sanders, cited in *ibid.*, 15.

7. For a collection of representative essays of all the major scholars who contributed to Old Testament theology, along with overview essays by the editors, see Ollenburger et al., *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*. For a good survey of the recent literature, see Moberly, “Theology of the Old Testament,” 453. For a good introduction to the literature, see Robert C. Dentan, *Preface to Old Testament Theology* (New York, Seabury, 1963); John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); and R. L. Hubbard Jr., “Doing Old Testament Theology Today,” in

*Studies in Old Testament Theology*, ed. R. L. Hubbard Jr., R. K. Johnston, and R. P. Meyer (Dallas: Word, 1992), 31–46. For magisterial surveys of the field, see Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 1–114; and Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*.

8. Johann P. Gabler, “An Oration of the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each,” in Ollenburger et al., *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*, 489–502.

proposal that was to confine the Bible solely to the arena of human experience is just as much a philosophical commitment.”<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the discussion of Old Testament theology must begin with certain philosophical assumptions.<sup>10</sup> In my view the church is best served when biblical theologians work in conversation with orthodox systematic theology regarding the Bible (bibliology) as the foundation and boundary in matters of deciding the basis, goal, and methodology for biblical theology. As Karl Llewellyn, a famous law professor, once said, “Technique [read exegesis, chapters 3–5] without ideals [read theology, chapters 1–2] is a menace; ideals without technique are a mess.” Dogmatic (systematic) theologians serve the church best when they rely on orthodox biblical theology for explications of Scripture from which they frame abstract universal propositions in accordance with a coherent system appropriate to the church’s contemporary situation. Through this interpenetration of the two disciplines, we will be better able to present the theological power and the religious appeal of biblical concepts.<sup>11</sup>

## II. THE BASIS OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

Resting on the logic that one does not need to prove the “rightness” of presuppositions (or they would no longer constitute presuppositions), but only their “reasonableness,” this chapter aims to establish an accredited understanding of the basis of doing biblical theology on the Bible’s claim to be God’s word to his covenant/faithful people.

### A. The Theological Foundation

This book is built on the following confessions about the Bible.

#### 1. Revelation

Theologians typically distinguish between God’s general revelation of himself in creation, which is made known to all people, and his special revelation of himself in the canon of Scriptures, which is not available by natural reason and cannot be discovered by the scientific method.

Through the words and verbally interpreted acts recorded in the Bible and through the incarnation of his Son to which the Bible bears witness, the God of Israel has revealed his heart, mind, wisdom, program, and purpose to his elect community, whom he regenerated to believe and understand that revelation by his Spirit. This God is neither a watchmaker who set the world in motion and left it to move in accord with inexorable laws built into its mechanism, nor an impersonal force or universal (un-)consciousness incapable of will, speech, or action. Rather, God is

9. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology: A Proposal* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 12.

10. Childs (*ibid.*, 73–74) sketches the relation between biblical theology and dogmatics.

11. Cf. James Barr, “The Theological Case against Biblical Theology,” in *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of B. S. Childs*, ed. Gene M. Tucker, David L. Petersen, and Robert R. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 16.

a person (i.e., having intellect, sensibility, and will) who chooses both to communicate with people whom he creates in his image and to intervene in their lives, as appropriate, according to their faith and ethical behavior. William Dyrness notes, “Revelation in the Old Testament always leads to a personal relationship between God and his people. If communion is to be possible, we must know the character of God through his personal self-disclosure.”<sup>12</sup>

However, God accommodates his revelation to the human situation. We must make the Scottish distinction between God “in himself” (*in se*) and “toward us” (*erga nos*). Cribbing the medieval philosopher John Duns Scotus, Francis Junius, a Reformed theologian in the late sixteenth century, maintains the distinction between theology as God knows it (*theologia archetypa*) and theology as it is revealed to and done by us (*theologia ectypa*).<sup>13</sup> Theologians sometimes refer to the former as “God hidden” (*Deus absconditus*) and the latter as “God revealed” (*Deus revelatus*) (cf. Exod. 34:6; John 6:20; 1 Cor. 13:12). This distinction points to the critical relationship between God’s comprehensive knowledge of himself, which is hidden and incomprehensible to humans, and human-restricted epistemological knowledge of God. Although the latter is severely restricted, it is nevertheless true because it is grounded in God’s own ontological knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, in the Bible God progressively reveals himself within the restrictions of human history and human personality. In that developing context he climactically revealed himself in a Son, not merely a prophet, in the God-Man, Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1–3). However, as Jesus promised, God saved the very best for the revelation authored by God and by the ascended Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit through the medium of Christ’s apostles and other writers of the New Testament. They interpreted Jesus Christ’s life, teachings, and work for the universal covenant people of God (John 15:12–15; Gal. 1:1–20).

God’s revelation in the Bible transcends his historical words and acts. The Bible records God’s special revelations in words and acts at certain times and certain places that were relevant to certain peoples such as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but the church now has those revelations in biblical texts that transcend those historical and particular revelations in two ways. First, the biblical narrators place those earlier revelations within the context of their own messages or theologies, which were intended to be relevant for a particular audience and for the universal audience of God’s covenant people (see chap. 4). Moreover, the particular revelations to the historical personages of the Bible and universal revelations of the biblical writers find their full meaning in Jesus Christ. In other words, it is wrongheaded of the historicists to seek to penetrate to the historical event beyond the biblical text, for the events cannot be known apart from the texts that form the canon (see chap. 4). In short, God’s revelation in Scriptures individually and collectively constitutes the basis of this theology.

12. William Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 26.

13. See R. Scott Clark, “Janus, the Well-meant Offer of the Gospel, and Westminster Theology,” in *The Pattern of Sound*

*Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries: Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple*, ed. David Van Drunen (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), 149–79.

14. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1.4.A, 1.338.